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RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON PRIORITY 2718

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SUBJECT: BANGLADESH ELECTION SITREP FOR DECEMBER 29

REF: DHAKA 1349

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SUMMARY

¶11. (SBU) Tens of millions of Bangladeshis streamed to the polls on 12/29 for Parliamentary elections; the day was largely free of the violence that plagued previous votes. Embassy and other election observers reported only relatively minor glitches at polling centers before they closed at 1600 local time (0500 Washington). Political parties raised some allegations of fraud, mismanagement, intimidation and favoritism, but there was no early evidence of widespread, systemic problems. Definitive results of the election rematch between the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), led respectively by former prime ministers Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, would likely be available early in the morning of 12/30, local time. Several Bangladeshi voters thanked Embassy officers for strong U.S. support for free, fair and credible elections. The real test, however, will be whether the parties accept the results peacefully and whether the winning party allows the losing party to play a meaningful role in government.

FESTIVE, VIOLENCE-FREE VOTING

¶12. (U) Bangladeshis turned out in large numbers to vote in the first Parliamentary election in seven years. Lengthy voter queues snaked outside many polling centers, and Chief Election Commissioner ATM Shamsul Huda predicted turnout would reach as high as 75 percent. The atmosphere was festive despite the long waits, in large part because the vote was generally free of the violence that wracked previous elections. Although media reports of partisan kerfuffles trickled in from several areas, they generally involved few people and were quickly quelled. Likewise, claims of voter list discrepancies affected only a small percentage of the 80 million registered voters. (Note: Two years earlier, a military-backed Caretaker Government imposed emergency rule amid widespread political violence in the run-up to elections scheduled for January 2007. The Caretaker Government subsequently delayed the vote and focused on creating an environment for free elections and on ridding Bangladesh of endemic corruption and political violence. End note.)

EMBASSY OBSERVERS, AMBASSADOR REPORT ONLY MINOR PROBLEMS

¶13. (U) Six three-member teams of Embassy observers, one team for each of Bangladesh's divisions, reported generally smooth

voting. A team of National Democratic Institute observers led by former U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh Howard Schaffer also reported only minor problems, as did many prominent politicians contacted by PolOffs throughout the day. Observers said officials at several polling centers had trouble finding individual names on the master rolls because party representatives provided incorrect registration information to voters. Although the discrepancies led to some delays, Schaffer said they were "not that big a deal." More ominously, one senior Bangladeshi reporter said he received reports from around the country that politicians were buying votes as in the past, although the allegations were difficult to prove. Front-page media reports on Election Day reported the police discovered 4.15 million taka (about USD 60,000), allegedly to buy votes, hidden in soybean oil cans in a car belonging to a candidate's son-in-law.

¶4. (U) Meanwhile, Ambassador Moriarty visited four polling centers in Dhaka where presiding officers told him operations went smoothly. At one polling center in Shakhari Bazar in Old Dhaka, a predominantly Hindu area, smiling voters told the Ambassador the election would be free and fair. At another polling center in an area of mostly lower income voters, elderly and disabled persons had difficulty going up several floors to vote and required assistance from friends and relatives. The Ambassador summed up his generally positive impressions in a live interview with Al Jazeera's English Channel.

ON TO THE VOTE COUNT AND RESULTS

¶5. (U) Perhaps the greatest test will come after polls close, when votes are tabulated and the two major political parties

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react to the results. (Note: Polls officially close at 1600 local time but anyone in line then will be allowed to vote. End note.) Although we expect partial results to be released throughout the night, we do not expect a clear picture of how the parties fared until early morning December 30. If the Awami League wins, as pre-election opinion polling suggests, all eyes will be on the BNP reaction. During the campaign, many BNP leaders accused the Caretaker Government of favoring the Awami League. More allegations of bias and irregularities were raised by BNP Office Secretary Mohammad Ruhul Kabir Rizvi at Election Day news conferences, perhaps laying the groundwork for a protest that, based on past experience, could turn violent. Still, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia said before the polls closed that voting had been "fair, so far;" the son of a BNP Standing Committee member, meanwhile, told PolEcon Counselor democracy would be the clear winner of the election.

COMMENT: SO FAR, SO GOOD

¶6. (SBU) The vote itself went about as well as could be expected, with violence at a minimum and generally only minor glitches at polling stations. In conversations with Embassy officers, several Bangladeshis expressed their gratitude for the U.S. Government's strong and consistent support for free, fair and credible elections as an important factor contributing to the atypical electoral calm. In meetings with political leaders just before the polls, Ambassador Moriarty stressed the importance of honoring the results of a fair election and rejecting the winner-take-all politics of the past. If the parties now heed that advice, this election could be a positive, historical turning point for this young, predominantly Muslim nation of about 150 million people. A transformational election could, in turn, create a more positive environment to pursue USG policies of supporting democracy, development and denial of space to terrorists.

MORIARTY